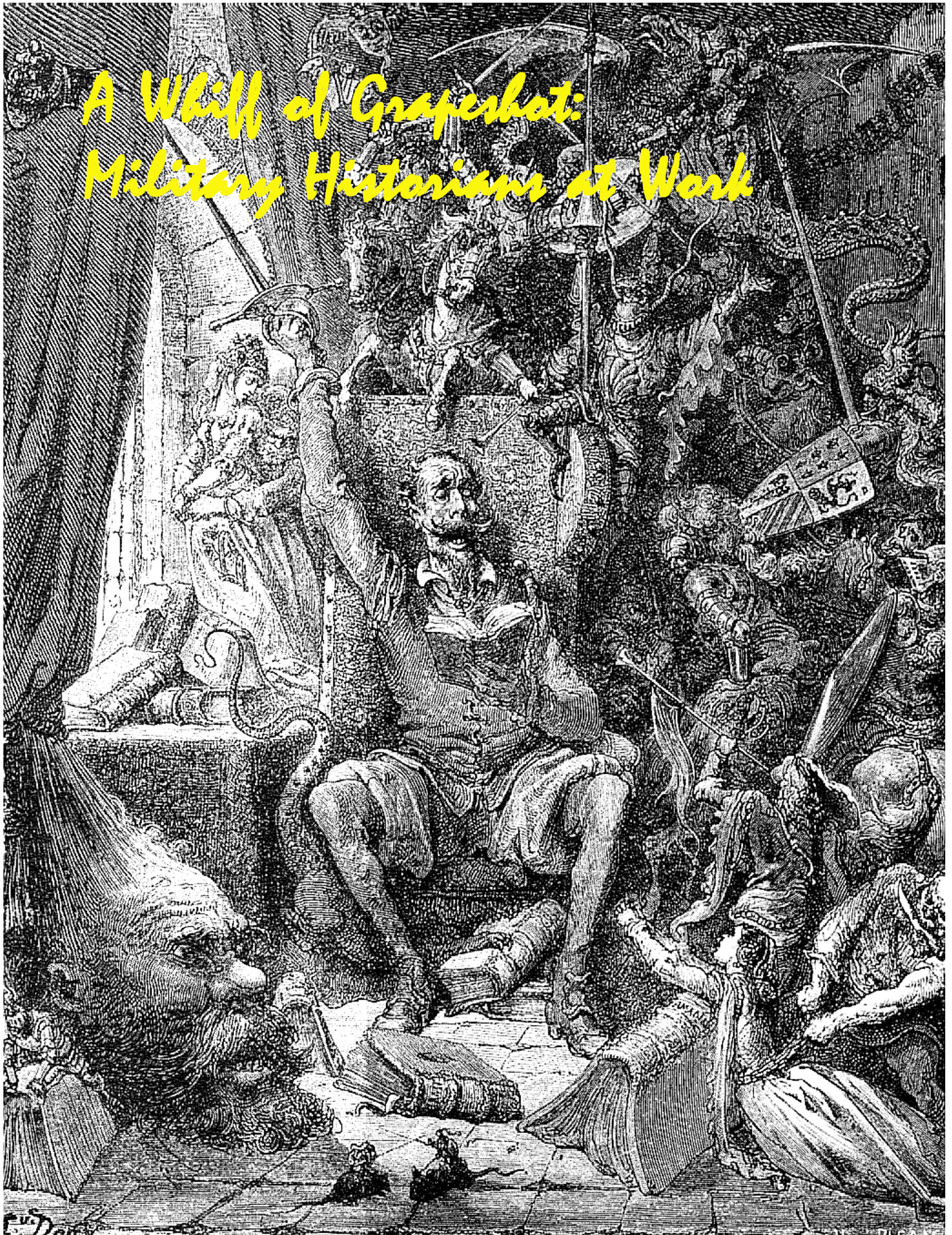


*A Whiff of Grapeshot:
Military Historians at Work*



Though grave-diggers' toil is long,
 Sharp their spades, their muscles strong,
 They but thrust their buried men
 Back in the human mind again.
 — *W.B. Yeats*, "Under Ben Bulbin"

Military historians, like Yeats' gravediggers, have been with us for a long time. Herodotus and Thucydides gave much of their attention to matters military. Alexander took an official historian with him on his campaign into Asia Minor. He was Callisthenes, Aristotle's nephew. But military history has not always met with the same acceptance as have other non-military inquiries. Gordon Craig says: "The military historian has generally been a kind of misfit, regarded with suspicion both by his professional colleagues and by the military men whose activities he seeks to portray. The suspicion of the military is not difficult to explain. It springs in large part from the natural scorn of the professional for the amateur. But the distrust with which academicians have looked on the military historians in their midst has deeper roots. In democratic countries especially, it arises from the belief that war is an aberration in the historical process and that, consequently, the study of war is neither fruitful or seemly."

In addition to academic suspicion, military history has been saddled with another unfair burden. It has been called upon to produce certainty in combat. During the tenure of Alfred Von Schlieffen, he assigned the German Army's historians with finding that common element in military history that would insure success, with finding a "philosopher's stone" that when touched would reveal the certain way to victory. He tasked them with producing infallibility. [Van Creveld, p. 150]

Russell Weigley, in the introduction to *New Dimensions in Military History* [Presidio Press, San Rafael, CA, 1975], cautions that "it is appropriate to be modest about the utility of military history." He points to the irony of the German military establishment which pioneered the compilation and study of military history in its war college before and after the turn of the 20th century and then went on to lose two world wars. If the Germans failed in two world wars, it was not for want of military professionalism. Nonetheless, military history would do well to heed the call for modesty for it cannot offer guaranteed success when facing the uncertainties of the future. That is history as augury, reading the entrails of the past in order to foretell the future.

If history seldom offers up specific lessons, it is because lessons are a matter of interpretation and, like picking a winner at the track, interpretations are a speculative thing. Rather than wrong headedly wishing for lessons or guarantees, it is better to settle for a sense of history, that is, a broader base of knowledge from which to draw during the decision-making process.

There are no infallible rules of conduct in war. There are only good decisions and even the best decision-makers are right only a little better than 50 percent of the time. To exercise good judgment in the fast-moving arena of combat, a good soldier will know his troops, his enemy, and himself. Only history can teach what it is to be human and prepare him for the unpredictability of human experience.

History is usually defined in two ways. The first is to let the word stand for all that has gone before—the events of the past. The second definition takes into account the work of the historian and calls history the systematic study of past events presented in an understandable and credible way, or, in other words, remembered past. So history is both what happened yesterday and how it is perceived today, not necessarily the same thing. In both senses of the word history and remembering are inextricably intertwined. The idea of one cannot exist without the other.

History can be said to be a science insofar as it examines the facts of the past and their causes in an orderly and exacting way. Few would argue that the study of history can produce the same degree of certainty that the physical sciences can. Despite the historian's critical efforts to come as close to the truth as possible, history is imperfect. Causes, motives and even events themselves are elusive. Objectivity cannot be guaranteed. All the historian can do is suggest a range of the possible and furnish a working measure of probability. The firm clay of the natural scientist's evidence hardens into a monument to universal laws and his powers of deduction, while the historian must be content with kneading the gelatin of his slippery facts. Certainty in history is a matter of degree.

But then Bertrand Russell says, "Cocksure certainty is the source of much that is worst in our present world, and it is something of which the contemplation of history ought to cure us, not only or chiefly because there were wise men in the past, but because so much wisdom turned out to be folly—which suggests that much of our own supposed wisdom is no better."

But just how practical can we expect history to be, especially military history, if there is no certitude? In an age of leap-frogging technology and at a time when management analysts hold sway there is a tendency to expect the same miraculous results from military history as those happening every day in the research and development fields. Can military history produce works that will prove of immediate value to the Army and solve its most pressing problems? Can a commander turn to a monograph to find practical answers to his questions? A commander longs for certitude; the military historian says he cannot give him that precious commodity. So the commander may conclude that it is time to shake off the dead hand of the past and rethink a doctrine of modern warfare which will have no precedents.

Maybe too much is being asked of the historian. He can only show what the best records and his reasoning say happened. Understanding remains the task of the beholder. If the historian could predict with

certitude, then generalship, and in fact the conduct of all human affairs, would be consigned to historians. But each reader of history has to make some commitment to knowledge, has to give his curiosity free reign. The student of military history has a certain responsibility to bring to the events of the past his own intimate experience with the techniques of warfare. The historian can be relied upon to present to the reader an intelligible account of events with which the student is both familiar and unfamiliar. It is the task of the student to match the unfamiliar with his own knowledge and experience and integrate the two into a new and enlarged view of the facts. He can find the ring of familiarity in many of the events, find himself nodding in agreement with some of the decisions or disapproving of others. (Barzun, 65) He may examine the events in order to find ideas that coincide with his own, in Santayana's image: Survey the events "as he might look over a crowd to find his friends."

The purpose of reading is not to receive wisdom on a platter (remember the wisdom of one age tends to be the folly of another), but to think about the human actions of others and their implications. The act of historic understanding must be active rather than passive, critical rather than trusting. To this extent the reader of history becomes his own historian. While his predictions can have no more certitude, they can at least be based on the educated judgment that everyone resorts to in daily activity.

The U. S. Army's Center of Military History, in its publication *The Army Historian*, noted that its new Research and Analysis Division would not "recommend decisions, but through objective explications and analyses of what has happened before," it would "point out the strengths and weaknesses of alternative policies of the past." But it cautioned, "The record of history is filled with instances of the misuse of historical evidence and analogy, often with disastrous consequences. History is not a source of fixed lessons carved in stone that can be applied mechanically to current situations. Instead, we continually learn new things from history as we ask different questions of history, and sometimes the lessons are neither expected nor welcome. It will be the task of Center historians to do what they can to provide the Army with sound, relevant historical analyses for its policy-making processes." ["The Center and Historical Analysis," *The Army Historian*, Number 3, Spring 1984, Washington, D.C.]

Whatever slights, real or imagined, that military history may have suffered at the hands of more dignified academicians or commanders determined to exorcise the demons of uncertainty, practitioners of that branch of history have inscribed their mark on the body of human understanding with both style and insight. What follows is a brief survey of some of the more indispensable laborers in the grove of history.

The Forerunners

Herodotus, the "Father of History," can also be claimed as the "Father of Military History." He felt compelled to write his *History of the Persian Wars* in order "to preserve from decay the remembrance of what

men have done, and to prevent the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due mead of glory." He was also interested in recording the reasons for their fighting.

Born in Halicarnassus in southwest Asia Minor in about 480 B.C., he was an Ionian Greek who set out to show that Athenian achievement and democracy would prevail over totalitarian Persia. He overthrew the mythopoeic tradition of Homer. Up until this time, myth and not history had made the past intelligible by selecting what would be remembered and then by giving it a universal significance in society. Herodotus introduced the idea of evidence and skepticism into what he called the art of "history." He employed that word to mean an "inquiry" into the past.

He began essentially as a travel writer cum anthropologist, visiting the regions of the middle east and offering observations like the Persians learned pederasty from the Ionian Greeks; Egyptian men urinate sitting, Egyptian women standing; and Lydian women raise their dowry by prostitution.

Like all pioneers or those who are first to be recognized for their undertaking, Herodotus would offend sensibilities and have his critics. The father of history also came to be called [by Plutarch] as the father of lies, an accusation that would linger over the historical profession for the rest of time.

His travels were to become part of his historical method. His visits to the scene of the battles he was describing gave him a feeling for topography and enabled him to interview all the residents of the area he could find that had the event within their memory.

This friend of Sophocles gave public readings of his work, in the oral tradition of the time. He is even said to have sung his histories. Herodotus died about 424 B.C., in his fifties, as the Peloponnesian War was entering its seventh year, relinquishing the field of history to a man about 20 years younger.

Thucydides was elected a general in 424 B.C., and led troops in the battle for the Greek city of Amphipolis. With the Greek defeat in this struggle at the hands of the Spartans, Thucydides was exiled from Athens and, having failed as a general, turned to writing a history of the war in which he had participated. He sought to understand his own times.

If Herodotus is remembered as the "father of history," Thucydides must be hailed as the "first truly critical historian of the world." [Bury, J.B., *The Ancient Greek Historians*] Having the advantage of writing about contemporary events, he was able to examine eyewitnesses, compare their accounts, and make critical judgments about the evidence. He explained his critical methodology: "...With reference to the narrative of events, far from permitting myself to derive it from the first source that came to hand, I did not even trust my own impressions, but it rests partly on what I saw myself, partly on what others saw for me, the accuracy of the report being always tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible."

Thucydides refused to rely upon oral bequests from antiquity. He wrote that he would "not be disturbed either by the lays of a poet...or by the

compositions of the chroniclers that are attractive at truth's expense; the subjects they treat of being out of the reach of evidence, and time having robbed most of them of historical value by enthroning them in the region of legend." He promised that "The conclusions I have drawn from the proofs quoted may, I believe, safely be relied on." [quoted in Gay]

Thucydides was attracted to his subject, the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, because it was the all consuming event of his lifetime. In fact it embraced his life; he died in 404 B.C., just after Athens fell. It is likely, as is often the case, that his subject chose him rather than he choosing his subject. He believed that the conflict "would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it."

He was a historian of political influences upon events and the military consequences of political decisions. He concluded the "real cause" of the war was "the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon." He spoke for future generations of historians when he stated the purpose of history. He wished for his work that it would "be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it."

Of all of the observations on military history which have survived as "eternal verities," Thucydides originated many of them.

Of the events of war, I have not ventured to speak from any chance information, nor according to any notion of my own; I have described nothing but what I either saw myself, or learned from others of whom I made the most careful and particular inquiry. The task was a laborious one because eyewitnesses of the same occurrence gave different accounts of them as they remembered, or were interested in the actions of one side or the other. And very likely the strictly historical character of my narrative may be disappointing to the ear. But if he who desires to have before his eyes a true picture of the events which have happened, and of the like events which may be expected to happen hereafter in the order of human beings, shall pronounce what I have written to be useful, then I shall be satisfied.

I have written my work not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.

The strong did what they could, and the weak suffered what they must.

...it is the habit of mankind to entrust to careless hope what they long for, and to use sovereign reason to thrust aside what they do not fancy.

Some historians, by virtue of their insight and style, are able to carry the freight of the past forward to ensuing generations of readers with a greater forcefulness than others. Edward Gibbon limns the decline and fall of the Roman Empire with a lofty eloquence and ironic wit. Witness his description of the emperor Gordian: "Twenty-two acknowledge concubines, and a library of sixty-two thousand volumes attested the

variety of his inclinations; and from the productions which he left behind him, it appears that the former as well as the latter were designed for use rather than ostentation." What writer does not envy his turn of phrase?

It was Thomas Carlyle, writing about the French Revolution, who coined the incomparable phrase "a whiff of grapeshot." Not only a stylist but an original thinker, Carlyle formulated the idea of movers and shakers in history. In *Heroes and Hero Worship* he said, "No great man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great men."

Writing *On History* he sees history as an art. "History which treats of remarkable action, has in all modern as well as ancient times, ranked among the highest arts." And he has some subtle advice for historians. ". . . the Artist in History may be distinguished from the Artisan in History; for here, as in all other provinces, there are Artists and Artisans; men who labour mechanically in a department, without eye for the Whole, not feeling that there is a Whole; and men who inform and ennoble the humblest department with an Idea of the Whole, and habitually know that only in the Whole is the Partial to be truly discerned. soldiers were drilled and shot, . . . will pass for a more or less instructive Gazetteer, but will no longer be called a Historian."

Delbruck

The Idea of the Whole was one which imbued all of the work of Hans Delbruck (1848-1929). Considered by many today to be the first military historian to use modern analytical methods, his history of warfare in western civilization was comparative, always taking individual components of military events and holding them up to the light of the whole framework of warfare. A student of Ranke, he was an advocate of a rigorous scientific approach and the use of first-hand accounts. He would dedicate his work "to historians and friends of history in the spirit of Leopold Ranke." Delbruck's teachers had studied with Ranke and he had sent all of his early work to the master, putting him firmly in the tradition of the "scientific" and "universal" historians. Influenced by Hegel and Goethe, his bent was humanistic.

Hans Delbruck was born on the island of Rugen in the Baltic Sea to a family of Prussian scholars, government officials and businessmen. His maternal grandfather was a professor of philosophy in Berlin and a favorite student of Hegel's. His paternal grandfather had been the tutor to King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia and to Emperor Wilhelm I of Germany. His father was a district judge.

He wrote a brief, self-effacing autobiography: "I derived from official and scholarly circles, on my mother's side from a Berlin family; I had war service and was a reserve officer; for five years I lived at the court of Emperor Frederick, when he was Crown Prince. I was a parliamentarian; as editor of the *Preussische Jahrbucher*, I belonged to the press; I became an academic teacher."

His own scholarship manifested itself by the time he was 19, a teacher remarking that “Delbruck’s exhaustive comprehension of history was matched only by his audacious interpretations.” He began his university life at Heidelberg, wrote his doctoral dissertation at Bonn in 1873, and, in January 1881, received an appointment to the faculty at Berlin. During this time he exhibited an analytical bent of mind and a tendency to question accepted authorities. Not satisfied with a recitation of what had happened, he wanted to know why the events had happened, and he was often critical of standard explanations. He avoided student fraternities, finding them superficial.

Even at this early stage he was putting together a *Weltanschauung* which combined practical experience with the world of ideas. He served a year of voluntary service (1868-9) with the Royal Prussia and North German Rifle Defenders of the Fatherland, finding time to read Shakespeare while on maneuvers. It may have been during this time that he came to see the relation between action and contemplation. Shortly after he got out of the service, he wrote to a friend that understanding arose from a synthesis of practical experience and ideas.

This focus on the practical application of knowledge would show itself throughout his career as a historian. Examples of warfare from distinct time periods and political settings were contrasted or explicated to meet the practical exigencies of Delbruck’s own time.

His studies were interrupted by the Franco-Prussian War (1870) and his philosophy would again be tempered in the crucible of experience. Entering the Army as a corporal, he eventually was commissioned a reserve lieutenant in the 29th Rhenish Infantry Regiment and was promoted to first lieutenant on the march to Paris with the Sixth Army Corps. He was awarded the Iron Cross, first class, before a bad case of typhus resulted in his discharge.

Passing over the battlefield after Saarbrücken and picking his way through the Prussian corpses, he was struck with the horror of war. His experience forced him to reflect on historical precedents. He concluded that on discipline will send men into a hail of fire and those troops without it will scatter at the first shot. He wrote, “I begin to understand how 10,000 closed formation Greeks could beat 100,000 Persians and how the city of Rome could conquer the world.”

His wartime service he considered an advantage. It fit in with his view that the scholar must weigh both experience and theory. He now had “the good fortune to become acquainted with the realities of war through service in the lowest ranks.” He realized that now he “Must seek to make himself master of everything at a higher level on a purely theoretical basis.”

In the Preface to his monumental *History of the Art of War; Within the Framework of Political History*, he remembered his drift into the specialized study of military history. “Quite soon after leaving the university I did some study of the history of the art of war, without really remembering how I first became interested in this. In the spring of 1874 I had a maneuver to do in Wittenberg; I obtained from the regimental library

Rustow's *History of the Infantry*, and from that time on I never again lost sight of this subject.

About his specialization in military history, he has said, “. . . universal history is also in need of a history of the art of war. Wars, which form and destroy nations, occupy such a broad part of the total of history that one cannot bypass the challenge, not simply to recount them event by event as reported in the sources, but to examine them critically and to develop a technically correct presentation. The best means of doing this, according to the law of the division of labor, is through a specialized history.”

Like his grandfather, Delbruck won an appointment as tutor to Prince Waldemar in 1874 and his travels with the royal family brought him into contact with not only the crown prince Friedrich Wilhelm, but with some prominent military officers in the royal entourage. His attraction to military history was sustained and developed.

Commenting on the influence conversations with these men had on him, he recalled some lines of Goethe about learning best, not from books, but from contact with wise men, from a living exchange of ideas. “In this position,” he wrote in his preface, “I had not only the opportunity to gain a certain direct understanding of how the decisions of an army commander originate psychologically, through the stories of the then Crown Prince himself and of Field Marshal Count Blumenthal, but I could also, though a question at any moment, clarify and fill out my studies, starting with Clausewitz, whose works the Crown Prince presented to me. I can still remember today points where my understanding had come to a stop, so to speak, and where a lucky expression, an appropriate word, carried me over the obstacle, and I cannot help thinking in gratitude, now, after almost twenty-five years, of the names of those gentlemen to whom I am indebted for this instruction.”

In 1877, at the request of the granddaughter of a leading Prussian general of the Napoleonic era, he began work on *The Life of Field Marshal Count Neidhardt von Gneisenau*, which he completed in 1880. Research for the biography brought him in closer contact with the letters and thought of the field marshal's friend and colleague, Carl Von Clausewitz.

Clausewitz's ideas about the limited wars of the 18th century in which maneuver was the tactical goal and the total wars of the Napoleonic era in which battles of annihilation were the objective, led Delbruck to investigate the impact of political, economic and social changes upon the conduct of war.

“In spite of the winged feet upon which the army moved across entire kingdoms, it was finally reduced to crawling, self-armored like a turtle, from one fortress to another. In the middle of the 18th century, tents, baggage, food, wagons, bake ovens, and other accouterments stopped up the stream; fortresses, fortified positions and other armies acted like dams in the way of victory. After the development of military institutions had been badly spoiled with many abuses came the French Revolution and again made valid the law of the natural elements. With this

event, the most audacious of all dare devils [Napoleon I] made his appearance and staked everything on one card: decisive battles of annihilation. Since then, all campaigns have produced such comet-like vibrations that they can scarcely be thought of as only military because they involve the whole of society.”

Delbruck’s work would continue to emphasize the effects of political and social factors upon war.

In 1881 he joined the faculty at the University of Berlin and began his military history studies in earnest. His first lecture was about the war of 1866. “Then I gave . . . History of Military Concepts and the Art of War since the Introduction of the Feudal System. I did not yet venture to introduce antiquity into this lecture. I had not yet worked it out myself from the original sources, and I felt, even though I had already started to harbor the idea that the prevailing belief about the development of Roman tactics (Quincunx-Stellung) could not possibly be right, that I was still not in a position to offer some other concept as a substitute. Not until two years later, in the summer of 1883, did I dare to announce the lecture ‘General History of Military Concepts and of the Art of War from the Persian Wars up to the Present.’ I then gave this lecture many times; and I also spoke on the ‘War of 1870,’ ‘Selected Chapters from Strategy and Tactics, for Historians,’ ‘The Principal Battles of Frederick and Napoleon,’ and finally (in the winter of 1897-1898) ‘Concerning the Economic Prosperity of Nations in its Interplay with their Military Posture and their Military Deeds.’ I published works based on original sources in the Persian Wars, the strategy of Pericles, on Thucydides and Cleon, the Roman manipular tactics, and pre-Germanic nation and district, the First Crusade, the Swiss and Burgundian battles, the bases of the strategy of Frederick and Napoleon; and at my urging, younger scholars did other works dealing with the most varied periods of military history, from Hannibal to Napoleon.”

About his historical method he said, “Technical accuracy is the prerequisite of success. Just as the artist or the military man who wishes to describe the past deeds of his particular field must adapt himself to carrying out methodical source studies, so too must the historian who wishes to recount wars, and especially the history of the art of war itself, study the objective conditions, the technical possibilities of the events, as long as is necessary to let him master them with complete certainty.”

“In principle, this requirement is in no way new, and from the very start one should eliminate the idea that, in the case of a work such as the present one, some different scientific method is to be used that applies in other areas of historical research. True enough, one may speak of critical analysis based on objective considerations in contrast to analysis based on the written word, but those are not opposites, only different tools of the same unified, scientific criticism. No philologist, no matter how strong the mastery he might feel that he possesses in strict, literal interpretation, will for that reason discard in principle the objective observation of the subject; no expert, even if he is able to demonstrate the practical context

with experimental certainty, will for that reason deny that the basis of all historical knowledge is the passing down of source-based facts. The only difference is that one, by virtue of his own studies and personal viewpoint, finds his strength principally in the philological method, the other more in the objective one. The one is subject to the danger of restating a false set of facts, since he is not capable of perceiving their objective impossibility; the other runs the danger of attributing to the past certain events taken from the reality of the present, without paying sufficient attention to the difference in circumstances. In order, therefore, to assure the accuracy of the research, the philological and the objective approaches must go hand in hand in every step and every observation, must constantly enlighten and control one another. There is no true objective analysis without a philological accurate base of source material, and there is no true philological study without objective analysis. Only in this way can one arrive at the full rigor of the method whose essence is the exclusion of all whim, both in the acceptance and in the discarding of the inherited accounts.”

To underscore this last point, Delbruck refers the reader to the epigraph taken from the Roman historian Polybius:

“But I say that we ought to judge that the writer’s authority be taken not necessarily as worth nothing, but, again, not as final; readers ought to make judgments from the facts themselves.”

While not pretending to such “high aims,” he recognized the need to write a History of the Art of War that would serve as a “practical manual,” as “. . . one has to believe that there is such a value inherent in the history of warfare, for the great captains have often said so. Napoleon, especially, laid down again and again the requirement that he who wished to become a strategist should study the great deeds of the past, and Clausewitz set up as an ideal the teaching of war purely by way of historical examples.”

Delbruck approached military history with a Rankean attention to facts accumulated from primary sources and a desire to interpret historical knowledge in a way that would be meaningful to the present circumstances and to the military men who would need this history. He proposed to put his material to the test of a dual examination. *Sachkritik* he called that method whereby he would critically examine all of the technical details of warfare, strengths, logistics, weapons, and strategic and tactical modes. At the same time he would consider political, economic, and social details. The second tool of his methodology was *wortkritik*, which would involve a philological scrutiny of his sources. To accomplish his purpose he would have to rely upon both a knowledge of human change and an understanding of the technics of war.

Gordon Craig explains *Sachkritik*: “Provided the historian knew the terrain in which past battles were fought, he could use all the resources of modern geographical science to check the reports that were handed down. Provided he knew the type of weapons and equipment used, he could reconstruct the tactics of the battle in a logical manner, since the laws of tactics for every kind of weapon could be ascertained. A study of

modern warfare would supply the historian with further tools, for in modern campaigns he could judge the marching powers of the average soldier, the weight-carrying capacity of the average horse, the maneuverability of large masses of men. Finally, it was often possible to discover campaigns or battles, for which reliable reports existed, in which the conditions of earlier battles were reproduced almost exactly. Both the battles of the Swiss-Burgundian Wars, for which accurate records exist, and the battle of Marathon, for which Herodotus was the only source, were fought between mounted knights and bowmen on one side and foot soldiers armed with weapons for hand-to-hand fighting on the other; in both cases, the foot soldiers were victorious. It should be possible, therefore, to draw conclusions from the battles of Granson, Murten, and Nancy that could be applied to the battle of Marathon.”

“Delbruck, by using his *Sachkritik*, could logically reconstruct ancient battles. He believed that if one knows the armament and the manner of fighting of the contending armies, then the terrain is such an important and eloquent authority for the character of a battle, that one may dare, provided there is no doubt as to the outcome, to reconstruct its course in general outline.”

By gaining a greater understanding of these key battles, one could know the tactics of an age. These single battles provided a thread of continuity over the centuries.

Another feature of his military history was the imposition of models upon the different periods of warfare to subject them to the same test of the cultural milieu of the time. The paradigms he employed were the Clausewitzian ones of limited war, or a strategy of attrition, and total war, or a strategy of annihilation. There was no correct strategy for all wars of for all eras. Each moment of history demands its own approach, given the political, economic, social and tactical requirements, and the morale and power at hand.

This belief put him at odds with most strategists of the day who, based upon a misinterpretation of Clausewitz, believed in certain accepted principles in any situation. When a commander lacked the will or power to annihilate the enemy, he would resort to a strategy of attrition. In assigning Frederick the Great to this model, he earned the condemnation of the Prussian officer class and the nationalist scholars who sought only to glorify and preserve a tradition.

In breaking with this tradition and seeking to unify the historian's sphere and the world of the operational soldier, he found himself attacked by both groups.

In order to realize the goal of professional military history, he arrived at four requirements for the military historian. Arden Bucholz summarized them in his book *Hans Delbruck and the German Military Establishment*:

“First, historians should acquire and utilize detailed knowledge of the practical realities of military life. To study military history and to carry out war were as different as art criticism and oil painting. Training

in military history did not prepare men to lead troops any more than archaeology prepared them to construct buildings. But it was impossible to describe the living phenomenon of the past without practical and technical knowledge. The artist and the art historian complemented each other as the officer and the military historian.

“Secondly, historians had to adopt the comparative approach. The historical sciences had developed based upon specialization—which was unavoidable but also fraught with dangers. Specialization must not only be limited to pure historical cross sections and single time periods, but should include comparisons made longitudinally, that is, between chronological blocks. Historians using a single set of standards should compare various features of one era with the same phenomena in a different time period.

“Thirdly, historians had to pay more attention to the uniqueness of military actions. Strategy, which was enormously complex, was often presented either too simplistically or too aesthetically [possibly suggested by Delbruck’s reading of Clausewitz]. In Theodor von Bernhardi’s *Frederick the Great as Commander*, all eighteenth-century generals except Frederick were treated as such simpletons that one was amazed that armies could be entrusted to their leadership [reminiscent of “war is too important to be left to generals].

“Finally, Delbruck took a conservative, materialistic view of war. The image of the military past closest to reality was apt to be one of hemorrhaging and exhaustion, not heroism and valor. If the experiences of the last wars were any indication, victory came not to those who did the right thing but to the army which made the fewest mistakes. Delbruck’s image of his own war experiences had not been dimmed by time, eroded by his exposure to the pomp and ceremony of the Prussian court, or replaced by other historians’ romantic idealism.”

From 1891-1914 Delbruck was a part of the debate about German strategy that dominated the government and General Staff. In 1891 Alfred von Schlieffen was named chief of the General Staff. Military history played an important part in the training of the German Army. The curriculum included three or four hours of military history a week during each year of the three-year course of study, and it was institutionalized with the Great General Staff. Many of the strategy planners on the General Staff were theorists who felt a want of experience in the field. To compensate for this, the study of military history became the only available substitute. Schlieffen wrote in 1910:

“In front of everyone who wants to be a commander lies a book, titled ‘Military History’ that begins with Cain and Abel. . . . History is not always exciting and one must work through a mass of less appetizing details, but behind this facade one finds the heartwarming reality, the knowledge of how everything has happened, how it must happen and how it will happen again. . . . Today, we must return to history for the practical experiences which the present refuses to grant us.”

Delbruck was strongly influenced by a book by Ivan S. Bloch, *The Future of War In Its Technical, Economic and Political Relations*. Bloch examined the killing power of the ordnance of the 1890s and concluded that the next war would be too dreadful to contemplate, not unlike the idea of mutually assured destruction of the 1980s. The technology of warfare had reached a point that could produce massive casualties and make war unthinkable. The potential devastation could not be justified by national goals, thought Bloch, a Polish-Jewish pacifist. 1900 The Polish banker Ivan Bloch publishes *Modern Weapons and Modern War* in which he predicts that the advantage given to defensive operations by modern firepower would make decisive victories in the Napoleonic mold impossible, and that destructive wars of attrition would make wars less of an instrument of policy.

Delbruck took Bloch's thesis further, analyzing population figures and economies, and determined that Germany could not survive an extended war of attrition. Its resources would be exhausted. It also rendered Schlieffen's idea of war of annihilation of the enemy unachievable.

Delbruck's views that Germany must take care to avoid a headlong rush into war because the outcome would be disastrous brought him in direct conflict with the popular chauvinistic policies of the day. The extreme nationalism of 1913 Germany created an atmosphere in which a cautious political commentator like Delbruck was ignored. He had no impact on the foreign or military policies of Germany.

He realized that an important distinction had to be made between historical thought and the realities of present-day military operations. Strategies were no more than theories until they were subjected to the test of experience on the battlefield. He recognized that historical analogies could be misdrawn and lead to disaster. So he was reluctant to try and impose his historical theories on operational planning. He did not want to be placed in the role of defense analyst.

During the war, Delbruck's opinions were reinforced by what he saw happening around him and he was critical of the continued pursuit of a war of annihilation, which was wearing Germany down. He favored peace negotiations. But in wartime criticism might be considered treasonous and he was careful to advance moderate views. He had no access to the nation's decision makers and, as before the war, no one listened to him.

The German Military History Section, as part of the General Staff, was outlawed and disbanded by the Treaty of Versailles. It survived, however clandestinely, as a civilian agency and continued to produce historical volumes in the patriotic tradition of Schlieffen.

If Delbruck had failed to influence the military planners, so too did he fail to convince the academic community of the value of military history. Viewing war as an aberrant product of society, German professors, and in fact intellectuals throughout the world, saw the study of war history as an undignified scholarly pursuit. Delbruck was unable to persuade them

that the study of military history was not militaristic (as the Treaty of Versailles, by banning the study of military affairs, would seem to dictate), but a legitimate way of looking at political, economic, and social history—an inseparable part of general historical understanding.

Through his efforts to pioneer a new role for history in the conduct of organized warfare, Delbruck reaped the antagonism of both the military officer and the professional historian.

In the first instance, his conclusions were opposed to the Schlieffen School which held an idealist, if unhistorical, view that the strategy of annihilation was the only one to pursue. In advocating that the Clausewitzian alternative of a war of attrition was better suited to an age of industrialization and death-dealing firepower, he was dismissed as an academic who presumed to encroach upon the professional concerns of the soldier.

By departing from traditional interpretations of German history in the revered 18th and 19th century, and again after World War I, and by speaking out for the acceptance of military history as a useful and separate historical discipline, he incurred the wrath of the conservative historical community.

Like all men who break new ground in scholarship or philosophy, his life's work was engulfed in controversy. Delbruck was spurned by the academic community for investigating war, a field of endeavor that they considered to be intellectually *infra dignitatem*. The military hierarchy dismissed his conclusions as presumptuous and heretical to the established strategic thought of the day. Despite the fact that his predictions, based upon his studies of military history, about the failings of strategy and military outcomes during World War I were startlingly correct, his stature remained largely unrealized. He died in 1929. The inscription on his gravestone is translated as:

*I sought the truth,
I loved my country.*

The legacy left by Delbruck has inspired a host of twentieth-century military historians who have in common a dedication to the interpretation of military events in a perceptive, original, and socially significant way.

* * *

Few people calling themselves military historians would be able to match the scope of Delbruck's accomplishments across this trifold spectrum. But some other contemporaneous efforts to bring military history to the fore deserve mention. A few military historians who have tried to use their historical method to influence the way wars are conducted are reviewed briefly here.

While Delbruck was beginning his professional career, Adm. Alfred Thayer Mahan was publishing *The Influence of Sea Power on History* (1890). Mahan was able to interpret the past in a way that it influenced the present. His theories about controlling global sea lanes, and hence

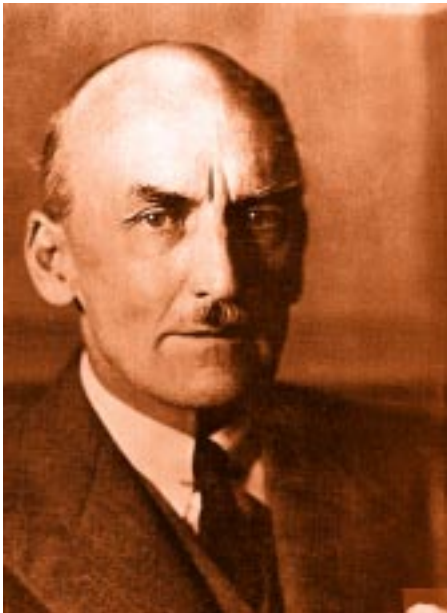


world commerce, through sea power did have a decided influence upon policy makers in both the United States and elsewhere around the world.

He believed, with Jomini, in maneuver rather than aiming at the destruction of the enemy's forces. This historian, though lacking the universal approach of Delbruck, reached a far greater international audience than did the prolific but unread German. In this respect he occupies a prominent niche among American military historians.

Russian military historians like D. A. Maslovskii, appointed in 1890 as the first chairman of the History of Russia Military Art at the General Staff Academy, and his successor, A. Z. Myshlaevskii, had some influence, sometimes significant, on the military policy-makers.

After World War I, when Delbruck was crying into the winds of defeat, two British military historians and veterans were formulating their theories of warfare, theories based on their different approaches to military history.



J. F. C. Fuller, like Clausewitz, was looking for a philosophical outlook that would explain the phenomenon of war. His output was prodigious. Some of his important works were *Decisive Battles of the Western World and Their Influence Upon History* (1940), *Armoured Warfare* (1943), and *The Conduct of War* (1961).

Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart, on the other hand, was more in the tradition of Jomini, and delved into the world of strategy. His strategy of “the indirect approach” is the unifying theory of his work. *Great Captains Unveiled* (1927), *The British Way in War* (1932), *Thoughts on War* (1944), *Strategy* (1954), and *The Tanks* (1959) are among his best-known volumes.

Both men were successful in campaigning for reform in British military thought, particularly in the increased development of mechanized warfare and the principle of *Blitzkrieg*—the lightning-quick armored attacks and breakthroughs. And both men were primarily concerned with the use of historical analogies to validate their theories. Persistent and prolific, they succeeded in revolutionizing 20th century strategy and tactics and had an influence upon land warfare no less than Mahan's contribution to warfare at sea.

Both men succeeded in mustering the lessons of history to reinforce the practical needs of contemporary military thinkers.

Fuller

As a young 21-year-old subaltern, Fuller already had formed opinions about the history education of his fellow officers. He said, “I have not been in the army very long but quite long enough to see that nine officers out of every ten, I might say ninety-nine out of every hundred, know no more of military affairs than the man in the moon and do not intend or want to know more.... It is no more a profession than shooting pheasant or hunting foxes.... That we ultimately will win in this war is

highly probable, but unless the tactics of our generals change it will be simply through sheer force of numbers.... War as everything else nowadays is reduced to a science.... I think William the Conqueror could teach us a thing or two. [Trythall, 11]

The lesson of the British South African experience, thought Fuller, was “that mobility is of crucial importance.” This was the kernel of his later military philosophy.

A fellow officer left this description of the 38-year-old Fuller, now a temporary Lieutenant Colonel, in 1917:

A little man with a bald head, and a sharp face and a nose of Napoleonic cast, his general appearance, stature and feature earning him the title Boney. He stood out at once as a totally unconventional soldier, prolific in ideas, fluent in expression, at daggers drawn with received opinion, authority and tradition. In the mess his attacks on the red-tabbed hierarchy were viewed in the spirit of a rat-hunt; a spirit he responded to with much vivacity, and no little wit. But he could talk amusingly and paradoxically on any subject. His specialties were Eastern religion, about which he could be bewildering, spiritualism, occultism, military history and the theory of war...[he] had dabbled in philosophy of which he could handle elementary statements to the complete confounding and obfuscation of the mess. He was an inexhaustible writer, and from his office issued reams on reams about training, plans of campaign, organization and schemes for the use of tanks.... He was neither an administrator nor probably a good commander, but just what a staff officer ought to be, evolving sound ideas and leaving their execution to others. He was well up in Napoleonic lore, and had all the maxims at his finger ends. [Trythall,]

Fuller, a 41-year-old colonel in 1920, had been the leading exponent of armor during the war, most notably in his ideas for deploying tanks outlined in “Plan 1919.” His intellectual contributions to the survival of the tank corps in the British Army were described by a contemporary:

At the Staff College before the war, Fuller was nicknamed “Boney”, the events of 1914 to 1918 justified the title. To General Swinton and Mr. Winston Churchill must be attributed the credit for the fact that the new weapon, the Tank, ever came into existence; to General Elles and his power of picking men was due the inspiration that made the Tank Corps such a splendid fighting force; to Colonel Uzielli we owe recognition of great organizing ability that enabled the Tank Corps to function effectively; but the brains behind it all were Fuller's. A flash of inspiration combined with faith may be responsible for initiating an invention, skilled hands may forge it into a weapon, gallant-hearted men may be ready to use it, careful arrangements may bring the man and weapon to the scene of action—all this is useless without the brains that direct the weapon's use and that was Fuller's contribution.

For their success Tanks require tactics no less than petrol; Fuller devised them. Before an attack can be launched there must be a plan; Fuller made it. After an attack, lessons must be learnt both from success and failure; Fuller absorbed them. And, sad to relate, in the case of the Tanks a constant war had to be waged against the apathy, incredulity and shortsightedness of GHQ; Fuller fought that war, and won. [Trythall,]

The tactics that Fuller devised were those of the old horse cavalry, made obsolete by firepower. They were drawn from the two principles of mobility and stability.

It was in 1920 that Fuller met and formed a friendship with Captain Basil Liddell Hart, 17 years his junior. The two men would form a kind of partnership in working for the reform of British, and eventually world, military thinking.

In his book *Reformation* he saw himself as some sort of a heretic, “a military Luther,” pronouncing that “to anathematize war is to gibber like a fool, and to declare it to be unreasonable, is to twaddle like a pedant.” Other unconventional utterances were things like “without war there would be no driving out of the money lenders from the temple of human existence,” and “the true purpose of war is to create and not to destroy.” Into military history he injected political and philosophical points of view.

But Fuller’s ideas about military reform came at a time after the costly first World War when no one wanted to think about war and its aspects. He did save the Tank Corps from being dismantled, but he had little influence on other decision-making during his stint in the War Office. This may have led to an increasing stridency in Fuller’s message.

By 1923 the Fuller message was that “war was a science as well as an art, and ought to be studied scientifically, and that technology was more important than man on the battlefield and therefore the future lay with small, professional armies.” Some of Fuller’s frustration emerged in his more radical views of 1923. “[It] was Fuller’s view that since war was in the last resort related to racial survival, and since existing systems of government did not seem to be willing or effective instruments of military reform, then it might be necessary to substitute more authoritarian systems in order to achieve it. The end of present-day democracy was in sight, he believed. The whole of this message, no doubt regarded by many as Boney’s Gospel, and the ways in which it was delivered, were almost entirely consistent with the characteristics he had displayed as a young officer and with the tenor and direction of his early writings.” [Trythall, 99-100]

One review of Fuller’s *The Reformation of War* in *The Army Quarterly* found the colonel to be:

...our one and only military prophet and like most prophets has little enough honour in his own country—save that of being misunderstood.... He maintains, however, that the true and logical developments of war in the immediate future should trend not towards increased slaughter and destruction, but towards greater humanity, and

security both of human lives and economic resources.... He avers that the true purpose of a general in the field should be...subjection of the enemy's will by the most effective and rapid means available.... Colonel Fuller is not an easy writer to read or an easy thinker to follow; like all prophets he is often obscure, not seldom inconsequent, too often biased. But what would you? We have only one military prophet; and in as much as the time has not yet come to build his sepulcher, it is perhaps ungracious to cast too many stones at him. [Trythall, 100]

The final chapter of his book, *Foundations of the Science of War*, Fuller devoted to the application of theory and practice in attempt to give war-fighting a scientific method, believing that it must be made a science before it could be said to be an art. "He...considered the problems of evidence and atmosphere inherent in the study of military history and put forward the view that its one true value was that it prepared us for the next war, as the one true value of history itself was its usefulness in the future. He then claimed that the system could be applied with profit by the military historian who should use its framework by ascertaining the causes of the war he is studying, the object of the belligerents and the military objects of the generals. He should then evaluate the instruments of war in physical, moral and mental order in order to obtain a tactical picture, cultural and racial understanding and understanding of the military leaders. Next he should examine the conditions in which the war was fought and the actions of the participants in the light of the principles of war and the law of economy of force. Finally he should project his deductions into the future and consider them in the light of probable future conditions. The system, he concluded, could also be applied to the fighting of wars, or rather to the construction of military plans and the solution of military problems. [Trythall, 115]

Called by one newspaper "the cleverest man in the Army," Fuller was appointed in 1926 to be an assistant to General Milne, Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

The purpose of *The Conduct of War*, according to Fuller, was "to reflect on the experiences of the last 100 years in order that we may fashion a little candle which will light our way through the next 100."

In his later years, Fuller drifted into the Fascist and Anti-Semite camp. He was a public admirer of Hitler. According to his biographer, "That Fuller's natural authoritarianism, his intolerance of those he chose to regard as fools, his career bitterness and his belief in military and political reform led him up the fascist path is clear." [Trythall, 192-3]

Decisive Battles was revised and republished between 1954 and 1956 in London as *The Decisive Battles of the Western World and Their Influence on History* and in New York as *A Military History of the Western World*. The reviews called it a major work and Fuller "the most eminent living writer on war." He was compared to Delbruck.

His biographer summed up his historical accomplishments:

...As a historian...he made a unique contribution. His system of writing military history, of drawing lessons from it for the future, either

as prescriptions, or predictions, first exposed in *Foundations*, was used again and again with great effect. He was never an academic, impartial seeker after the truth, and he used his imagination extensively, but the total insight he achieved by this method more than compensated, in his later, less strident works, for his faults of scholarship. Some of his deductions, notably the law of military evolution and the constant tactical factor, are important contributions to historical understanding.

Fuller died on 10 February 1966 after contracting pneumonia while staying at a British seaside hotel.

Liddell Hart



Those who knew Liddell Hart had warm affection for him. Ronald Lewin said, "From the books you certainly didn't get the impression of warmth: here, you felt, was a forthright writer, a man who didn't suffer fools gladly, a man who knew his own mind—not really you felt a lovable man...But of course when you met him the whole of that went by the board. Immediately you realized that here was a warm, generous, humorous person, with an enormous range of interests." Michael Howard remembered that "Scores if not hundreds of students and disciples were bound to this implacable and loving master." [quoted in Bond, 2]

In the 1920s Liddell Hart began to formulate the theories that would become the theme for his subsequent writing. He called for fluid infantry tactics with deep penetration by armor and strategic bombing of the enemy's logistical infrastructure. His rapid combined infantry/armor assaults would be given the name *blitzkrieg* by the Germans. His larger strategic doctrine Liddell Hart would call the indirect approach.

While many thought that the introduction of nuclear arsenals in the 50's would change warfare as the human race had known it, Liddell Hart was among the few that saw that nuclear arms and the reluctance to use them would cause a proliferation of conventional wars, many sponsored by the super powers.

Realizing that even the most active military officer will have a very limited direct experience of his profession, Liddell Hart points to the study of military history as the best way to augment direct experience with indirect experience of military history. Liddell Hart, himself a soldier, finds indirect practical experience a more valuable kind of experience because it provides a wider scope upon which to base theory and application. The military student who relies only upon direct experience or on limited study of history "will be like an inverted pyramid balanced precariously upon a slender apex."

"Here is the rational justification for military history as the basis of military education—its preponderant practical value in the training and mental development of a soldier. But the benefit depends, as with all experience, on its breadth . . . and on the method of studying it."

Liddell Hart surveyed all periods of military history and discovered that success was rarely forthcoming unless and indirect approach, sometimes physical and always psychological, was used to catch the enemy unprepared. He favored this kind of broad survey over the specialized approach because he believed history was a “universal experience” of many men under many varying conditions. The danger of studying just one or two campaigns exhaustively is that the view will be too narrow and the lessons drawn likely fallacious. The means or physical factors of war change constantly while the decision-making process changes only in degree.

“An intensive study of one campaign unless based on an extensive knowledge of the whole history of war is likely to lead us into pitfalls. But if a specific effect is seen to follow a specific cause in a score or more cases, in different epochs and diverse conditions, there is ground for regarding this cause as an integral part of any theory of war.”

“A surveyor . . . has at least a wide perspective and can take in the general lie of the land, where a miner knows only his seam.”

Liddell Hart used history to form the underpinnings of his ideas, especially about the efficacy of the indirect approach. His first historical work was a biography of Scipio Africanus called *A Greater Than Napoleon* (1926) in which he made the military actions of Scipio a mirror for his own theories. Jay Luvaas called the work “A vital and instructive biography.... This is perhaps one of his best books from a literary point of view although Liddell Hart himself later questioned whether it is not too ‘coherent and convincing.’” [quoted in Bond, 44]

His reliance on the lessons, or “keys,” of history was the hallmark of his work. It gave his theories the authority of science. He would quote Bismarck’s pithy remark: “Fools say that they learn from their own experience. I have always contrived to get my experience at the expense of others.” [Bond, 44] That is not to say, however, that he considered himself an academic historian, a breed for which he had little regard. Rather, history was for Liddell Hart a way to put his military theory in perspective, a perspective that would support his views. He looked at the past in terms of present needs.

For this he received the disapprobation of the critics. Referring to *Great Captains Unveiled*, one said “these sketches are more than biographies—they are propaganda...a good word is said on behalf of tanks on every appropriate occasion.” Another reviewer resorted to heavy irony: “Captain Liddell Hart takes as his field the past, the present, and what is to be. With one foot on a tank and one on a testudo, why, man, he doth bestride the military world like a Colossus, and we petty men walk under his huge legs and wonder where on earth we are.”

The danger of using the examples of history to support a predetermined theory is that other examples may be ignored, willfully or by omission, that disprove the theory.

Speaking about his belief in the “indirect approach,” Liddell Hart concluded that “the art of the indirect approach can only be mastered, and

its full scope appreciated, by study of and reflection upon the whole history of war. But we can at least crystallize the lessons into two simple maxims, one negative, the other positive. The first is that in the face of the overwhelming evidence of history no general is justified in launching his troops to a direct attack upon an enemy firmly in position. The second, that instead of seeking to upset the enemy's equilibrium by one's attack, it must be upset before a real attack is, or can be successfully, launched...."

Having had a chance to review the manuscript at Liddell Hart's request, T.E. Lawrence put his finger on the problem of marshaling historical examples for one point of view: "You establish your thesis: but I fear that you could equally have established the contrary thesis, had the last war been a maneuver war, and not a battle war. These pendulums swing back and forward. If they rested still that would be absolute truth: but actually when a pendulum stands still it's that the clock has stopped, not that it has achieved absolute time!"

In his biography of Sherman, Liddell Hart found a parallel in the deadlock produced by firepower in Virginia with that of the trenches of France in 1914-18. He saw in Sherman's march to the sea the fulfillment of the strategy of the indirect approach. He acknowledged Sherman's influence upon his theories in his *Memoirs*.

While the concept of deep strategic penetration by a fast-moving armoured force had developed originally in my mind when studying the Mongol campaigns of the thirteenth century, it was through exploring the rival operations of Sherman and Forrest that I came to see more clearly its application against modern mass armies, dependent on rail communications for supply. Study of Sherman's campaigns also had a strong influence on other trends in my strategical and tactical thought. Any reader of my subsequent books, in the nineteen-thirties, can see how often I utilized illustrations from Sherman to drive home my points—particularly the value of unexpectedness as the best guarantee of security as well as of rapid progress; the value of flexibility in plan and dispositions, above all by operating on a line which offers and threatens alternative objectives (thus, in Sherman's phase, putting the opponent on the 'horns of a dilemma'); the value of what I termed the 'baited gambit', to trap the opponent, by combining offensive strategy with defensive tactics, or elastic defense with well-timed riposte; the need to cut down the load of equipment and other impedimenta—as Sherman did—in order to develop mobility and flexibility. [quoted in Bond, 48-9]

Liddell Hart has been indicted as being primarily a promoter of the "indirect approach" and only secondarily a historian. He used history only as a handy visual aid with which to support his theory. As such he differs not at all from today's military analysts and politicians who use historical anecdote to infuse their positions with the haughty authority of the past. Michael Howard has said of Liddell Hart's historical arguments: It would be doing Liddell Hart an injustice, both as a historian and as a controversialist, to suggest that this analysis of British strategy was anything more than a piece of brilliant political pamphleteering, sharply argued, selectively

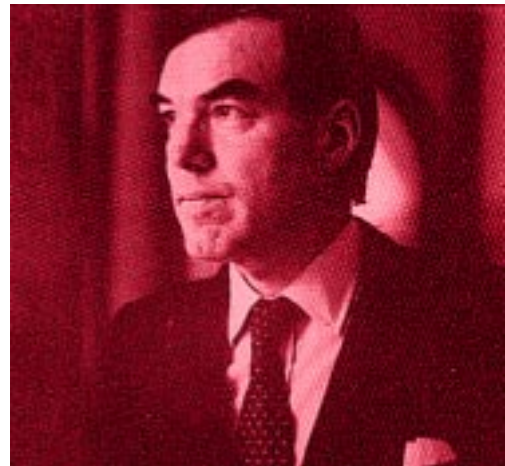
illustrated, and concerned rather to influence British public opinion and government policy than to illuminate the complexities of the past in any serious or scholarly way.” [quoted in Weigley, *New Dimensions...*, 70]

Keegan

In the tradition of the J.F.C. Fuller and Liddell Hart, John Keegan picked up the mantle of British military history at the end of the 20th century with his fascinating take on the personal side of war. Unlike Fuller and Liddell Hart, Keegan did not come from the ranks, being denied his childhood aspirations of being a soldier by teenage tuberculosis. Born in May 1934 in London, he graduated from Balliol College, Oxford, in 1957, receiving his master's degree, and immediately began teaching at England's Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, eventually becoming the senior lecturer in history. After more than 25 years of teaching, he resigned his post at the Royal Military Academy to devote more time to his books. In 1986 he left Sandhurst to become Lees Knowles lecturer in military history at Cambridge University, followed by a journalism career, writing about defense and military issues for the *Daily Telegraph*, and various British and American magazines. His honors include a fellowship at Princeton University in 1984 and the award of the Order of the British Empire in 1991. Some of his work is listed in the bibliography that follows this essay.

Keegan's point of view takes in the common soldier, his emotions, his motivations, and adds them to the mix of tactics and strategy. For this ability to embrace the wider view of war, he has been called by one critic, “Proust in a foxhole,” and credited with writing “about war better than almost any one in our century.” [Contemporary Authors, Vol. 136] An early example of his approach was *Face of Battle*. In the first chapter of that book, he set forth his reasons for writing the book and his methods of preparation. “I have not been in a battle; not near one, nor heard one from afar, nor seen the aftermath.... I have questioned people who have been in battle...have walked over battlefields...have often turned up small relics of the fighting.... I have read about battles, of course, have talked about battles, have been lectured about battles and...have watched battles in progress, or apparently in progress, on the television screen.... But I have never been in a battle. And I grow increasingly convinced that I have very little idea of what a battle can be like.”

Again, in *Six Armies in Normandy*, he gets close to the soldier's point of view, a kind of “military history without romance,” according to *Newsweek's* Jim Miller. In this short dissection of the landing at Normandy by allied forces, Keegan looks at units of American, Canadian, English, Polish, French, and German troops, his narrative finding that each of these forces was “a mirror of its own society and its values, in some places and at some times an agent of national pride or a bulwark against



national fears, or perhaps even the last symbol of the nation itself.”

In *The Mask of Command*, Keegan looked at just four leaders over history, Alexander the Great, the Duke of Wellington, Ulysses S. Grant, and Adolf Hitler, to determine what their varying leadership styles had on history. His thesis is that military commanders carefully groom an image, a mask of command, that hides any weaknesses and presents only the image he wants his troops to see, one of confidence and one that fits the values of the time and place. The four characters also give Keegan a chance to explore the heroic (Alexander), the anti-heroic (Wellington), the unheroic (Grant) and the false heroic (Hitler), these categories explaining the social and military conditions of the warfare of the period they represent.

John Keegan's gifts as a military historian have caused some to consider him “our greatest living military historian,” an appraisal with which I would not disagree, although Russell Weigley and Robert Utley would have to be placed in close proximity. What gives him his prominence is not only a critical eye for the more human aspects of war, but a style that makes reading him a pleasure.

Here is Keegan, in the introduction to *A History of Warfare*, on that tribalism that sets the military man apart:

The veterans I met at Sandhurst in the 1960s were by many external tests no different from professional men in other walks of life. They came from the same schools, sometimes the same universities, they were devoted to their families, they had the same hopes for their children as other men, they worried about money in the same way. Money, however, was not an ultimate or defining value, nor even was promotion within the military system. Officers, of course, hankered for advancement, but it was not the value by which they measured themselves. A general might be admired, or he might not. Admiration derived from something other than his badges of superior rank. It came from the reputation he held as a man among other men and that reputation had been built over many years under the eyes of his regimental tribe. That tribe was one not only of fellow officers but of sergeants and ordinary soldiers as well. “Not good with soldiers” was an ultimate condemnation. An officer might be clever, competent, hard-working. If his fellow soldiers reserved doubt about him, none of those qualities countervailed. He was not one of the tribe.

* * *

Soldiers are not as other men—that is the lesson that I have learned from a life cast among warriors. The lesson has taught me to view with extreme suspicion all theories and representations of war that equate it with any other activity in human affairs. War undoubtedly connects, as the theorists demonstrate, with economics and diplomacy and politics. Connection does not amount to identity or even to similarity. War is wholly unlike diplomacy or politics because it must be fought by men whose values and skills are not those of politicians or diplomats. They are a world apart, a very ancient world, which exists in parallel with the everyday world but does not belong to it. Both worlds change over

time, and the warrior world adapts in step to the civilian. It follows it, however, at a distance. The distance can never be closed, for the culture of the warrior can never be that of civilization itself. All civilizations owe their origins to the warrior; their cultures nurture the warriors who defend them, and the differences between them will make those of one very different in externals from those of another. ... Ultimately, ... there is only one warrior culture. Its evolution and transformation over time and place, from man's beginnings to his arrival in the contemporary world, is the history of warfare.

Official American Military History.

Eight years before Delbruck's death, another brave attempt to inject analytical thinking into history. Professor Robert M. Johnston of Harvard University addressed the Army War College of 1914 on the "Functions of Military History." He pointed to the "direct utility" of history and urged, not just superficial reading but, the development within the professional officer of a critical sense. He said, "What we are concerned with in reality is not science, but applied science; not military history, but applied military history." [Reardon, p.77.]

In the 1880s and 90s, the Army undertook to distribute among some officers and far-flung garrisons the multi-volume *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* where they came in handy at places like Fort Huachuca to keep the Arizona wind from blowing doors shut.

So widespread was the use of military history in the writings of late nineteenth century U.S. Army officers, its use was accused of being self-serving. But Carol Reardon points out in that splendid book *Soldiers and Scholars* that the Army's use of history was far beyond hero worship or drum-and-bugle history. "For many contributors to the new American literature on the art of war, the path to a more professional officer corps followed two tracks, and the study of military history offered reliable guideposts along each route. First, each officer had to understand his role as a soldier, as a professional trained in the principles of war and their applications on the battlefield. This required him to transcend his own sense of nationalism to learn all he could from the past experiences of others, even those of potential enemies. Second, each American officer needed to understand the relation between his army and his government in order to comprehend his nation's conception of the proper conduct of war. Both goals placed great demands upon the record of the past." [Reardon, p. 93.]

In 1914, Chief of Staff Leonard Wood ordered the establishment of a three-man Historical Section within the General Staff of the War Department. A history of the Civil War by members of the Army War College was proposed in 1912 and became the U.S. Army's first attempt at "official history." The project was abandoned in 1916 upon the recommendation of Maj. William D. Connor heading the Historical Section because of uneven writing and research. Its failure to get off the ground

could better be attributed to internecine disagreements about doctrine.

First begun at the Army Staff College in 1906, the “historical ride,” later to be known as the “staff ride,” became a keystone of advanced officer training within the U.S. Army. These open-air classrooms had U.S. Army precedents in the nineteenth century map exercises and terrain rides known as *kriegspiel* and were modeled after the battlefield tours that were a part of European officer training for at least as far back as 1806. The tours of American battlefields combined theory and practice and were well received by the participants. Colonel Robert Lee Bullard called the staff rides “delightful beyond all my hopes and profitable beyond my expectation.” [Reardon, p. 50.]

In an 1877 address on the study of the science of war, Maj. Gen. John Schofield noted that “the duties of a military officer are becoming, year by year, more complex and more difficult to perform.” So it was even more important, Schofield argued for the officer to learn not only from his own “observation, [and] experience,” but from “the careful study of the experiences of others who have gone before us.” [Reardon, p. 9.] Schofield’s sentiments stand at the beginning of a tradition of relying upon military history within the Old Army. He was followed by a host of military history advocates, like Capt. James S. Pettit who said that military history is “the foundation of our art, the basis of our profession,” or Captain Arthur L. Conger who said, “Military history is the laboratory of the military profession.” [Reardon, p. 35.]

Military history has never been without its critics within the U.S. Army, and that was certainly true in the latter part of the 19th century when there arose such a groundswell for a more professional officers’ corps. Many officers who had risen through the ranks and learned their lessons in the field chasing Indians, felt they would be left behind if the Army turned to book learning as its new standard of professionalism. The naysayers claimed that the study of history only prepares the student to fight the wars of the past, not future wars. They claimed that the qualities of the good officer were inbred and could not be taught away from the battlefield. Arthur Wagner, as one of the leading proponents of professional standards within officer education, was quick to respond to these critics. As a captain, he wrote in 1899: “There are officers who pose as practical soldiers, and affect to despise all theory. These...are generally ignorant and obstinate men who know as little of the practice as they do of the theory of war.... How can we be sure that they will not ‘some day find themselves compromised on service from want of knowledge, not from want of talent?’” [Reardon, p. 37.] In an unkind swipe at the immigrant soldier who earned his commission on a Civil War battlefield, he referred to this class of anti-progressive officer as the “Ireland army...whose military education was acquired in following the company swill cart.” [Reardon, p. 102.]

The progress made at Leavenworth by visionary men like Arthur Wagner in infusing the benefits of military history into officer education and upgrading the intellectual content of that education would have

obvious payoffs during World War I. "Thank God for Leavenworth," remarked Maj. James Van Fleet who served with the Sixth Division in that war. That professionalism was advanced was obvious. Historian Reardon concludes that "the American officers best trained in the theory and practice of the art of war, had left a mark on the American Expeditionary Force far out of proportion to their numbers." They "found themselves holding many of the most sensitive and responsible positions in the AEF."

World War I also brought the U.S. Army's first great experiment in the use of military history to a close. Its results were mixed. In its contribution to the crucial intellectual component of military professionalism, the utility of the study of history for a soldier could not be questioned. Without a strong foundation in the practice of the profession of arms in the past, to use an analogy the Old Army's officers would recognize, the principles or laws of war existed only as the individual gears of a machine; military history provided the fuel, greased the wheels, shifted the gears, and showed all the different ways the machine could work, or, conversely, how it could break down. It could help to teach a soldier to think for himself, to be objective, to lift the fog of war a bit. It could help an officer perform his duties efficiently throughout his career, especially as his responsibilities grew. [Reardon, pp. 203-5.]

During and after the Vietnam War, the U.S. Army did a lot of soul-searching. It found it had somehow drifted away from the values of the Old Army. Duty, honor and country had in some instances been replaced by careerism, ticket-punching, and self-interest. Leadership had in some cases been replaced by management. A belief in the lessons of history had given way to a reliance on technology. Almost a century before, Capt. Arthur Wagner advised the study of military history because "the ablest of generalship is merely human wisdom applied to human knowledge." It would be a mistake, he advised, to forget that human wisdom is fallible and to rely on misinformation. In Vietnam history had been replaced by statistics and macabre body counts.

But true values, although apparently absent, are never far from the surface. They need to be rediscovered and recharged. In 1971 the Department of the Army established the Ad Hoc Committee on the Army Need for the Study of Military History. It took them little over a year to conclude, not surprisingly, what their title implied. The result was to be a greater role for the study of military history in service schools and by the individual professional soldier. It did its work of rediscovery and renewal by emphasizing the need for officers "to develop historical mindedness...to contribute individually to broadened perspective, sharpened judgment, increased perceptivity, and professional expertise." The result has been an Army program to incorporate history into all levels of the educational system. Staff rides have been resurrected and today are again commonplace.

The term "official history" conjures up images of Winston Smith in his cubicle revising the texts to conform to the latest official versions of

the past. Life imitates art. A Soviet historian is paraphrased by Bernard Lewis (*History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1975) as having said that the historian's most difficult task is predicting the past.

The Center of Military History took pains to avoid the criticism of sanctioned history by using historians who were beyond reproach. A British Historian, Charles Fair, who was often hostile in his treatment of American military leaders, affirmed that "The attitude of the American authorities to historical inquiry is not only beyond all praise, but also not the least of the hopes of mankind in a wider sphere. They are not afraid of the facts of history." [quoted in Weigley, *New Dimensions...*, Presidio Press, San Rafael, CA, 1975, 34]

The Army Combat History Teams have led the way in evolving a distinctly American form of military history which focuses on the individual soldiers, or groups of soldiers, rather than on the decisions of their leaders. This is in keeping with the American spirit of democracy and is reflected in most American scholarship.

Command Decisions is the title of a book edited by Kent Roberts Greenfield and published by the U.S. Army Chief of Military History in 1960. It is a study of some of the decisions of World War II that had a decided influence upon events. This collection, a sampler from the Chief of Military History (CMH) series of volumes on World War II, makes clear that decisions in a complex age of technology are most often collective ones and the result of intricate staff work which could distill the number of alternatives. It also discovered that in very few instances did political factors impact on military strategy decisions.

The assortment of situations requiring decisions portray in common the isolation of the individual when taking the full risks of decision-making and the personal character that must be mustered in the face of these demands. Greenfield concludes, "Such a use of history is a legitimate and profitable exercise, though it can never be conclusive. The historian can sometimes sketch with confidence a commander's persistent and dominant traits of character. Unfortunately, he can rarely say, and never be sure, how these operated in producing a given decision. He is bound to use with skepticism what a commander says or writes after the event about his motives, so quickly corrosive is the effect of hindsight, the compulsion to justify ourselves and our lapses of memory."

"The quest for the intangibles of personal motivation will continue to be fascinating, if only because of our insistent conviction that the qualities of an individual that affect his decision can never be reduced to a formula and that these qualities have a determining effect on the fate of humanity."

About the historical method of this ample selection of Army historians, all of whom produced volumes that together constituted the U.S. Army's official history of World War II, Greenfield wrote:

The historian knows that 'asking the right questions is fundamental to all scholarly inquiry.' But he cannot afford to let himself be

bound by any predetermined set of questions of assumptions. His business is to establish and relate the facts of experience within the broadest possible horizon of interest. He cannot know what questions his readers will bring to his reconstruction of the past. What he seeks to do is to make it as varied and rich in meaning as his respect for objective fact-finding and his sense of historical perspective permit him to make it. The present studies were written by historians with this outlook and objective . . .

The reader can be assured that “the situation is portrayed accurately and fully as it can be.”

In her epilogue, Carol Reardon quotes a 1984 *Military Review* article which calls for the study of the science and art of war by focusing on “the historical record of change in military methods,” because military history “is nothing more or less than the records of trial and error on which today’s principles and methods are based.” Reardon finds an “eerie similarity to General Scholfield’s advice to his subordinates one hundred and seven years earlier.” [Reardon, 212-13.]

Some American Military Historians

The best writing about the American Civil War comes in threes. Bruce Catton’s three-volume history of the war, Shelby Foote’s trilogy, the three-volume [condensed from six] biography of Lincoln by Carl Sandburg, and Freeman’s contribution called *Lee’s Lieutenants*.

Douglas Southall Freeman’s *Lee’s Lieutenants: A Study in Command*, is a masterpiece of military biography. In a review, Bernard De Voto had this to say about the three-volume work:

...One’s admiration is divided between the book and the qualities of mind that produced it. Dr. Freeman has notably served letters, the United States, and the spectral everlasting nation to which his heart is dedicated. He will have the respect and gratitude of every one who values the enrichment of American culture. He is a great historian working at the height of his powers on a great subject: the destruction of a nation, the defeat of a great army fighting against the odds, the Confederacy from noon to sunset. No one else has told that story with such knowledge, authority and judicious wisdom. No one else, I am constrained to add, has told it with such nobility, whether in Mr. Freeman’s identification with his subject or in his exalted justice, holding always to the most rigorous objectivity in the critical passages where the pain of identification was unquestionably intense. [quoted on bookjacket of *Lee’s Lieutenants*]

As part of a combat history team, a unique American innovation, S. L. A. Marshall was able to interview literally thousands of soldiers as they returned to the rear fresh from combat in three wars.

Marshall, like Ardant Du Picq before him (in 1880), was interested in the individual soldier and his behavior in combat. He was led to



believe that an army is an independent social organism with its own rules. Rules or formal discipline imposed from above will have little effect on men in battle.

In *Men Against Fire* he wrote, "It is to see that fear is general among men, but to observe further that men are commonly loath that their fear will be expressed in specific acts which their comrades will recognize as cowardice. The majority are unwilling to take extraordinary risks and do not aspire to a hero's role, but they are equally unwilling that they should be considered the least worthy among those present."

Marshall's field historical studies took on a larger purpose than pure narrative and analysis. He sought to convince the Army hierarchy that it was "fighting its wars in the wrong way. It was his conviction that success in battle depended upon structuring an army correctly; and in arguing his case for a new structure of small groups or 'fire teams' centered on a 'natural fighter,' he was undoubtedly guilty of over-emphasis and special pleading. His arguments were constantly effective, so that he has the unusual experience, for a historian, of seeing his message not merely accepted in his own lifetime but translated into practice. But, almost for that reason, they are arguments of which the academic historian, trained not to simplify but to portray the complexity of human affairs, ought to beware. A dose of Marshall is a useful corrective but it is not a cure-all for the ills of military history."

S. L. A. Marshall was the antithesis to the armchair historian. His library was the front line. His sources were the warriors recently returned from combat. He knew first-hand the terrors of combat. During the Korean War he was caught in a mortar barrage and remembered: "I took off afoot across the stretch with not another person in sight. Halfway, three mortar shells came in, exploding within fifty or so yards of me. The terror I knew was almost overwhelming. I ran until I was exhausted. It always happens that way. Be a man ever so accustomed to fire, experiencing it when he is alone and unobserved produces shock that is indescribable."

His method of after-combat interviews was not without problems. Like most oral history, there often occur accounts that do not square with other reports. Marshall admitted that "men under the strain of battle forget what they have said or done." But his method was essential to his thesis. He wanted to know how soldiers behave in the emotional cauldron of combat, how they perform in a life and death situation. He wrote: "My argument was, that if we did not know how our men performed in battle, all the rest of it would be superficial. The test of America at war lay in the effectiveness of the hands on the combat line and not in how various headquarters interpreted what they were doing. ... Those who would understand the true nature of war must begin by understanding man's own nature, in its strength and in its weakness and in that fine balancing of good and evil, compassion amid brutality, hope amid ruins, and laughter in the middle of death, which give man his unique capacity for survival." [quoted in J.F.C. Fuller's "Foreword" to Marshall, S.L.A., *Battle at Best*,

Jove Books, NY, 1989.]

A 1912 Ph.D. graduate of Harvard, Samuel Eliot Morison (1887-1976) would teach at that school for forty years, with breaks for both world wars and a Harmsworth professorship at Oxford. He retired in 1955. In World War II, Morison served as an infantry private, first with the Depot Brigade at Fort Devens, Mass, and later with the American Commission to Negotiate Peace, in Paris.

He published his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus* in 1942, in both a two-volume edition and a condensed one-volume version. It was to be the making of his reputation as a sea-worthy historian and would lead to his navy commission as a lieutenant commander in May 1942, to undertake an official history of the U.S. Navy in World War II. Morison explained how he gained the confidence of the navy leadership and happened to be an eye-witness to much of what he wrote about during the war.

As my position in the Navy was unprecedented, I had to move warily and gingerly in order to obtain co-operation from those who doing the fighting. Amusingly enough, their initial suspicions of a "long-haired professor in uniform" were dissolved by perusal of my *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, which told them that I was a sailor before I became a professor, and thus exorcised the academic curse. So, thanks to Columbus, the Navy accepted me, and with many of its members I made warm friendships, which even survived what I felt obliged to write about some of their mistakes. [Beck, xix]

Between 1947 and 1962, he published the fifteen volumes that made up the official history. In 1963 a single volume appeared, *The Two-Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War*. Some of his better known naval histories and biographies are *John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography*, 1955; *Christopher Columbus, Mariner*, 1955; *Commodore Matthew Galbraith Perry*, 1967; *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages, A.D. 500-1600*, 1971; and *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages, A.D. 1492-1616*, 1974.

There could be no better preparation for the writing of history than personal experience. He paraphrased Polybius, who "twenty-one centuries ago, wrote that historians should be men of action; for without a personal knowledge of how things happen, a writer will inevitably distort the true relations and importance of events." [Beck, 380]

Writing on "History As a Literary Art," Morison advised a new post-World War II generation of historians:

...I say (as the poet Chapman said to the young Elizabethan): "Be free, all worthy spirits, and stretch yourselves!" Bring all your knowledge of life to bear on everything that you write. Never let yourself bog down in pedantry and detail. Bring history, the most humane and noble form of letters, back to the proud position she once held, know-



ing that your words, if they are read and remembered, will enter into the stream of life, and perhaps move men to thought and action centuries hence, as do those of Thucydides after more than two thousand years. [Beck, 392-3]

Four men must be mentioned for their singular contributions to our knowledge of the American Army in the Southwest.

For the larger perspective on the United States Army, two books by Russell F. Weigley are indispensable. His *American Way of War* and *The History of the United States Army* are remarkable in scope and erudition.

Another pair of essential histories are Robert M. Utley's *Frontiersmen in Blue* and *Frontier Regulars*, which cover the U.S. Army and the Indian Wars from 1848 to 1890. Models of historic elucidation, they enliven the whole spectrum of Army policy, the soldier's life, and the crackle of gunfire. Utley's final paragraph in *Frontier Regulars* gives a sample of his balance:



"... the frontier army was not, as many of its leaders saw it, the heroic vanguard of civilization, crushing the savages and opening the West to settlers. Still less was it the barbaric band of butchers, eternally waging unjust war against unoffending Indians, that is depicted in the humanitarian literature of the nineteenth century and the atonement literature of the twentieth. Rather, the frontier army was a conventional military force trying to control, by conventional military methods, a people that did not behave like a conventional enemy and, indeed, quite often was not an enemy at all. This is the most difficult of all military assignments, whether in Africa, Asia, or the American West. The bluecoats carried it out as well as could be expected in the absence of a later generation's perspective and hindsight. In the process they wrote a dramatic and stirring chapter of American history, one that need not be diminished by today's recognition of the monstrous wrong it inflicted on the Indian."

For a fascinating account of the every-day lives of the soldiers who garrisoned the West pieced together from their own written accounts, see the superb social history by Don Rickey, *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay*.

The last name on the list of historians who have impressed upon our imaginations the saga of the soldier on the frontier is that of Dan Thrapp. In a series of exciting volumes, he has combined painstaking research with human drama and left us with a record of the Apache campaigns that will be unsurpassed for many years to come. Read *Al Sieber: Chief of Scouts*, *The Conquest of Apacheria*, *Victorio and the Mimbres Apaches*, and *General Crook and the Sierra Madre Adventure*.

* * *

Understanding ourselves and the societies in which we live is the gift of those military historians discussed above and countless others. Without knowledge of our cultural heritage and the values bequeathed from previous generations, we would have scant chance for survival on

anything more than a barbarian level. Self-awareness, then societal awareness, are prerequisites to solving society's problems, not the least of which is the resolution of conflict. Understanding ourselves and our interaction with other humans and the environment is indispensable to enlightened judgment. Historical judgment can never be compensated for by technology or science.

All that we learn is through experience, our own or that of others. Even mathematical or abstract knowledge will have been extracted from observable experience. All experience is located somewhere in the past, and is indistinguishable from history.

The idea of history as entertaining as well as instructive has been around at least long as the ancient Greek rhetoricians who spoke of not only the *utilitas* of history, but the *voluptas* as well. Gibbon believed that history was the study of man and that the contemplation of human life "should be the favorite amusement of man. It is his easiest and yet least mortifying method of studying himself." Carlyle, who is remembered for his remark that history is made up of countless biographies. Insofar as they all have messages about life to tell, "the Dead," as Thomas Carlyle put it, "are all holy." So military historians, thrusting "their buried men back in the human mind again," are a priesthood, performing their modest sacraments of critically understanding the past.

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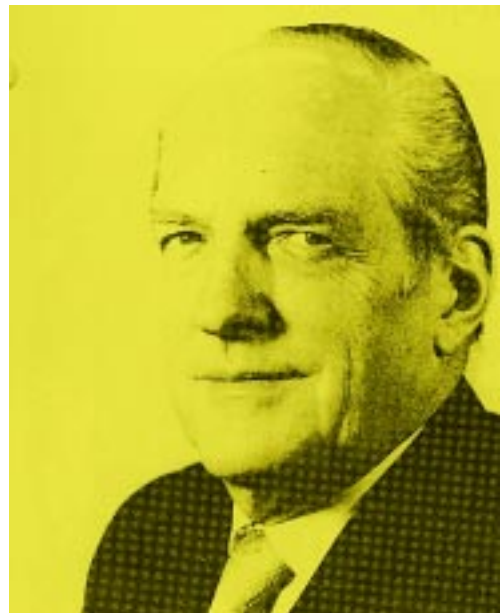
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